DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 197 EA 025 829

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TITLE Postmodernism as the Cultural Skin of Late Capitalism: Mapping and the Educational Challenge.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Capitalism; *Critical Theory; *Democratic Values; Educational Change; *Educational History; Elementary Secondary Education; Marxian Analysis; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Postmodernism

ABSTRACT

This paper asks whether postmodernist thought is helpful or harmful to education. It critiques postmodernist theory in both a favorable and critical light and studies the phenomenon within the context of historical and contemporary socioeconomic, cultural, and political developments. The author argues that postmodernism is best understood in relation to its material base. The hypothesis is that postmodernism is best understood as the cultural skin (or superstructural manifestations) of the economic dynamics of late capitalism. Finally, because the greatest threat to a genuine democratic project, including education, is capitalism's direct and hegemonic power, any theory and practice of liberatory progressive education must be conducted within an anticapitalist framework. A conclusion is that the contributions of postmodernist thought to intramural education practice and theory deserve fairly good grades. However, because capitalism is the greatest threat to bona fide democracy, postmodernist though cannot be endorsed as an overall ally of liberative praxis and transformative politics. (LMI)

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POSTMODERNISM AS THE CULTURAL SKIN OF LATE CAPITALISM: MAPPING AND THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

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New Orleans, April 1994

EA 025 829

INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper represents an accurate set of descriptors of its content; however, for those who have not worked within the discourse of Critical Theory and democratic Marxist thought, this may not be obvious. Relatedly, persons who work in the many and varied areas of education have significantly different understandings of the present arguments occurring about the meaning and significance of what has been called postmodernism. My interest in the need for genuine participatory democracy—one that features fairness and equity for each and every citizen—is integrally connected to my commitment to education for democratic empowerment as well as schooling that gets beyond the reproductive role assigned to this process in capitalist societies. This commitment to a radical democratic project that allows workers and citizens to move beyond current injustices based upon social class, racial, gender, sexual preference and other memberships has caused me to begin analyzing critically the whole concept of postmodernism. The main thrust of my recent scholarly work can be called a radical and democratic critique of capitalist education and it has caused me to bump-up against the problems and possibilities represented by postmodernist thought and representation. It is necessary to ask whether the intellectual/artistic projects of postmodernist interpretation, portrayal and representation are helpful or harmful to those of us who favor education that emphasizes critical citizen empowerment, rich cultural awareness and accomplishment, encouragement for those who have been victimized historically and presently, respect for what students already know, economic awareness instead of mere vocationalism and the possibilities for young people to help create a society that is supportive of the kind of education being favored.

It is my intention to describe postmodernist thought and representation in both a favorable and critical light. Obviously this necessitates studying the phenomenon within the context of historical and contemporary socioeconomic, cultural and political developments. I would argue further that postmodernism and postmodernist activity is

understood best in relation to its material base—but not in a crude base superstructure dichotomous manner. Although my hypothesis is that the capitalist economy is most powerfully causal with regards to so-called "superstructural" institutions and processes such as schools, schooling and education, a dialectical/interactive model between and among them is privileged in this study. The hypothesis used in this work is that postmodernism and postmodernist thought/art are best understood as the cultural skin (or superstructural manifestations) of the economic dynamics of late capitalism—a condition characterized by multinational corporations, the relative weakness of national governments, the threat of globalism and totalism as the result of capitalism's colonization of everyday life by advertisement and consumer goods that threatens to make each and every person in the world an addict to what the shopping mall bonanza has to offer during the last years of the twentieth century. The supporters and agents of this business society have sought to turn every social site (including schools) into places where their view of the world can become hegemonic.

Educational theorists and practitioners must analyze critically the phenomenon called postmodernism in terms of its antecedents and roots as well as how its cultural contexts affect and condition the attempts to educate the young. Dealing with the postmodernist challenge requires participation in intra- and extramural learning and activist contexts. Recognition of problems and possibilities is a necessary first step with regard to a transformative praxis aimed at altering significantly a society characterized by social class, race, gender, homophobic, misogynist and other structural/cultural injustices. There is a need to develop an explanatory total/global theory because of late capitalism's powerful totalism and global reach. In spite of postmodernist emphases upon and support of difference(s), plurality, tolerance, as well as anti-canon, anti-foundational and anti-essentialist activities, postmodernist distrust of grand narratives and theory results all too often in confining the mass of people within a status quo dominated by the imperative and logic of capitalism. In addition to the progressive characteristics of postmodernist thought,

a roughly agreed upon general view must be constructed by inclusive participatory agency that is comprised of the wonderful diversity of persons. Postmodernist thought and art are often characterized by attempts to portray the frenetic complexities and non-foundational realities of contemporary life; however, many postmodernist intellectuals and artists fail to recognize their relationships and usefulness to late capitalism.

Lastly, I will argue in this work that because the greatest threat to a genuine democratic project—including education—is capitalism-as-a-system's direct and hegemonic power, any theory and practice of liberatory progressive education must be conducted within an anti-capitalist framework. This kind of transformative education (not just schooling) must move beyond postmodernist conceptions that are trapped within the cultural skin and/or superstructure of the current form of global capitalism. My arguments will continue to be tested as I offer them to colleagues, students, et al.

POSTMODERNISM DESCRIBED

In the first chapter of Walter Lippmann's *A Preface to Morals* (1929), the author addresses "The Problem of Unbelief" and gets to the heart of the condition that haunts both modernist and postmodernist responses to the representational, portrayal and intellectual explanation challenges caused (for the most part) by the explosive dynamics of capitalism, its accumulation processes and its cultural manifestations. Lippmann writes specifically to the erosion of certainty and terra firma by the "acids of modernity." Marx claimed in the mid-nineteenth century that under capitalism "All that is solid melts into air." Lippmann's description of the erosion of cognitive certainty deserves reading, or hearing, his own words.

> At the heart of it [modern man/woman's discontent] there are likely to be moments of blank misgiving in which he [also read feminine pronoun throughout] finds that the civilization of which he is a part leaves a dusty taste in his mouth. He may be very busy with many things, but he discovers one day that he is no longer sure they are worth doing. He has been much preoccupied; but he is no longer sure he knows why. He has become involved in an

> elaborate routine of pleasures; and they do not seem to amuse him very much. He finds it hard to believe that doing any one thing is better than doing any other thing, or, in fact, that it is better than doing nothing at all. It occurs to him that it is a great deal of trouble to live, and that even in the best of lives the thrills are few and far between. [Perhaps the contemporary merchandise market of late capitalism would render this point anachronistic?] He begins more or less consciously to seek satisfactions, because he is no longer satisfied, and all the while he realizes that the pursuit of happiness was always a most unhappy quest. In the later stages of his woe he not only loses his appetite, but becomes excessively miserable trying to recover it. And then, surveying the flux of events and the giddiness of his own soul, he comes to feel that Aristophanes must have been thinking of him when he declared that "Whirl is King, having driven out Zeus."[1]

The society we refer retrospectively to as modern emerged from a recognition that human beings and their projects are vulnerable and contingent as well as lacking in the degree of epistemological accuracy necessary for certainty, foundationalism and essentialism in the schooling process. The relationships between modernism and postmodernism are historically real; moreover, it could be argued that the latter is a developmental extension of the former, rather than "post" or something entirely new. There are differences between the two phenomena as well. Modernism is characterized by attempts to find security, sometimes through liberatory collective action based upon admittedly imperfect theoretical understanding; whereas, postmodernism is characterized by a seeming abandonment of hope for human security, diffidence concerning adequate theorizing/portrayal and lack of faith in the possibilities for large scale, broad based, effective agency. Many postmodernists view the attempt to formulate a theoretical grasp of problems and possibilities as just one more example of oppression by the theorists over others. One could argue that the postmodern state of mind represents a radical victory of a modernist culture that can be described as restless, critical, unsatisfied and insatiable; however, neither modernists nor postmodernists have been successful in making culture and society under capitalism more answerable to genuine democracy and human (as opposed to property/profit) criteria.

Zygmunt Bauman argues that the postmodern state of mind is "marked ... by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving *destructiveness* ... [The] postmodern mind is a critique caught at the moment of its ultimate triumph: a critique that finds it ever more difficult to go on being critical ... because it has destroyed everything it used to be critical about ..."[2] It is my view that the persistence of capitalism's dominant power along with persistent injustices based upon social class, racial, gender and other memberships should cause one to think that there is a good deal left to oppose. John McGowan argues that foundational truths are not essential for capitalism's maintenance; therefore, postmodernist attacks upon canons and other forms of alleged certainties may not be progressively radical. This insight is supported by the obvious tension within Rightist coalitions between: (1) those who champion the maximization of profit as most important, and (2) others who push so-called social issues that are connected to fundamentalist religionists' insistence on the inerrancy of the Bible—and/or other alleged holy books. As McGowan has written, the capitalist monolith cannot be weakened by postmodernists' "anarchistic celebration of difference wherever it appears. [In fact,] such a strategy merely replays, on ... different terrain, the [earlier] modernist delusion that some particulars can escape the general operating principles of the social context."[3] McGowan continues, "While conservative intellectuals worked to shore up society's foundations and radical intellectuals considered attacks on foundational beliefs ... [as] effective political action, capitalism blithely went its own way ... Consent to capitalism today ... has more to do with the daily life of its solidity, of its ability to provide a framework ... that functions without being obtrusive [to some] or having to be questioned."[4]

It is difficult to shock persons through a media that combines art and entertainment when most of the viewers are sophisticatedly ensconced within the retail market of late capitalism—a system that provides one of the only decisive consummatory acts, viz., purchasing—even though so many persons are politically disempowered. It appears that religious fundamentalists are most vocal concerning how shocked and outraged they are by

advertisement, entertainment and other portrayals that are seemingly acceptable to most others as congruent with the logic and needs of consumer capitalism. Obviously the capitalists and their agents are supportive of media portrayals that help sell the wares available in the shopping mall and convenient store culture of late twentieth-century America and elsewhere.

Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) sought to describe a society dominated by consumption as a way of life, one from which it was difficult to get outside of the whole in order to analyze and criticize its totality. Getting beyond the shopping mall and larger one-dimensionality requires thought that explains the relationships of the parts to the whole, along with an account of historical development. In the absence of such intellectual accomplishment, a transformative praxis seems unlikely. It is reasonable to argue that the postmodernist distrust of grand narrative/theory (or *grands récits*) serves to confine historical actors to the terrain of a status quo that, for the most part, represents defeat for genuine democracy. Madan Sarup tells us that "for [Jean-Francois] Lyotard ... the postmodern condition is one in which the *grands récits* of modernity ... [for example] the emancipation of the worker ... the classless society—have all lost credibility."[5] These master narrative speak of human attempts to find our identity, fulfillment and justice in the conquest of nature. For example, the Marxist *grand récit* presents the story of the proletariat's struggle to establish a realm of freedom and plenitude beyond the forces of economic necessity. But Lyotard fears the "authoritarianism" of grand theories such as Marx's and Freud's; better, many postmodernist thinkers advise us to live within the alleged plurality of the buy-and-sell culture of postmodernism during this period of late capitalism.

It becomes obvious as one reads postmodernist literature that it is better suited to warning readers about various tyrannies than enabling persons to find common ground in order to collectively resist and eventually overcome various injustices. For example, Lyotard rejects Jurgen Habermas's argument that there are universally binding claims of

validity and/or the possibility of consensus norms that can enable effective communication. Although Lyotard deserves credit for his insight into and exposure of various forms of domination that are based on specious assertions of universal applicability and foundational knowledge, it is also clear that within this Babel of conflicting discourses and norms the collective project of radical democracy becomes less capable of success. For Lyotard, communication is fragmented into distinct "language games" whose rules are not reducible to one another. Furthermore, participants in these "games" are thought to contest with one another, thereby altering the rules. One does not have to be an educational essentialist or hidebound conservative to recognize communication difficulties involved in classroom or extramural contexts to make oneself understood, even with regard to what people may disagree about. As David Ingram has written, "The indeterminacy of meaning continually frustrates the formation of a unitary political culture based on principles of rational consistency and personal sovereignty."[6] Sarup claims that Lyotard, Michel Foucault and many other postmodernist thinkers are neo-conservatives because "they offer us no theoretical reason to move in one social direction rather than another."[7]

The postmodernist encouragement of people to get out from under alien tyrannical canons as well as return to the smaller cultural worlds from which they came coincides with the current resurgence of a politics of identity throughout the world. This politics can be seen as progressive when it is directed against a canon, curriculum, pedagogy, and/or socioeconomic systems which are distasteful to us; however, the current events in the former Soviet Bloc remind us of the down side of such a politics. There are obvious school analogies to the societal politics of identity that are being debated in this country and elsewhere. Because postmodernist thinkers seem to reject the possibility of critique's liberatory potential they have shifted emphasis to aesthetic, textual and quasi-political strategies aimed at making it (hopefully) easier to live within the interstices of an overall culture and society many of them find distasteful. Relatedly, there has occurred a commitment to a "politics of inclusion"—the inclusion of all persons who are judged to

have been unjustly excluded from fair treatment in the past and presently. Those who have been deemed "the other" by those with power have been celebrated by postmodernists. In many cases, any and all differences have been lionized with the hope that this inclusion would be just and that it would disturb the stifling, superficially smug (but actually frightened and reactionary) atmosphere of the rich, capitalist societies. Pluralism has become a primary value; furthermore, this has been justified, in part, by the right to dismantle hierarchies of power that have enabled the selecting and sorting that divides people into us and them (the other) in both society and school.[8] This attempt at dismantling is one with a refusal to accept Western privileging of mathematical and scientific definitions of reality at the expense of other ways of knowing. This deconstructive project is obviously implicated especially in attempts to achieve justice for persons of color and women. The ramifications for schooling are obvious.

This strategy of deconstruction and dismantling is understandable in societies and cultures in which the main sites upon which we live have been conquered and colonized by capitalism and its manipulation of racial, ethnic and gender differences as well as the system's distorted use of science and technology. One can sympathize with this strategy; in fact, many of us have used versions of it ourselves. However, this kind of guerilla action on the margins and within the interstices of a one-dimensional, hegemonic society represents choices and life-styles that are achievable mostly for those who are well-situated, comparatively affluent and well-schooled. All too many are not able to afford to play this game—or pursue this strategy—nor are their children.

Most postmodernists grant that capitalism is the dominant force during this historical period; however, their analyses describe a society within which the ramifications of that power are so pervasive, complex, multicausal and even victim-assisted that it is difficult or impossible to direct critique and transformative liberatory action against this powerful system. If this were not enough, the individual and/or collective actors are usually portrayed as not capable of seeing things clearly/accurately enough in order to

ascertain the complexities and oppressions of their lived experiences, let alone to communicate effectively with one another in order to build oppositional alliances. It seems obvious that if all texts are inescapably open-ended and mutable and all signifiers (all of us who try to make sense of texts written and immediately experiential) are personally subjective and unstable, then there is little possibility for getting beyond mere conversation and on to effective political actions which can improve our society and schools according to equitable and democratic criteria. If human actors or signifiers are cognitively so weak and the texts of lived reality so opaque, then the social subject of the future will not even be aware of his/her loss of effectiveness and freedom but will, instead, come to resemble a character in a Bergman motion picture who disappears into the grainy dots of the film.

In concluding this brief description of postmodernist thought it is useful to include Todd Gitlin's even briefer response to the question: What is this thing called postmodernism? Gitlin's answer is directed mostly to the context of experiences and phenomena in the United States. In his view "post-modernism is more than a buzzword ... it is a way of seeing, a view of the human spirit and attitude toward political as well as cultural possibilities."[9] Gitlin's six "theories" on the postmodernist mood serves us in a reiterative sense, as well as per se and in terms of a bridge to part two of this work. The six "theories" offered by Gitlin are: (1) postmodernism represents an ideology which articulates and serves the emerging capitalist order; (2) scientific reason has been a corrosive force that minimizes and/or makes incredible the authority of big-picture theory and grand narratives; (3) the electronic media and related phenomena have caused the current shriveled attention span and present-tense emphasis; (4) postmodernism represents and extrapolation of historical eclecticism in this country; (5) postmodernism is above all a post-1960s phenomenon that is characterized by cultural helplessness; and (6) postmodernism has a generational feature, viz., those born in the 1950s and 1960s whose experiences include the "towering abstraction of money," privatization, weightlessness and seemingly passive adaptations to information bits and bytes—all at high speeds—a

generation that feels they are stranded historically. According to Gitlin, the threat of nuclear destruction has caused this generation to adopt a superficially cool posture—one of anticipatory shell shock.[10] The 1960s seriously altered the American belief in linear progress as well as in moral clarity. In Gitlin's view, "Old verities crumbled, but new ones have not settled in. Self-regarding irony and blankness are a way of staving off anxieties, rages, terrors and hungers that have been kicked up but cannot find resolution ... The fear is that what's underneath hurts too much; better repress it."[11] Lippmann would understand. So would Ernest Hemingway's character, the old waiter, in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" who, after suffering from a pervasive yet poignant existentialist angst, says to himself that his inability to fall asleep during the night's last hours must be only insomnia

POSTMODERNISM AS THE CULTURAL SKIN OF LATE CAPITALISM

After having provided a generalized description of the phenomenon called postmodernism—albeit with a bit of analysis—it is necessary to provide a more specific thesis. McGowan has argued that postmodernism begins with a fear that we are experiencing what Fredric Jameson has called "the apotheosis" of capitalism through the prodigious expansion of its logic and practice into previously uncommodified areas. Late capitalism is portrayed by critics and some advocates as constituting a totalizing terrain upon which contemporary life (in economically "advanced" societies) is played out. Unfortunately, "in keeping with their primary concern with cultural issues, postmodern artists and intellectuals focus not on economic practices and institutions of late capitalism but on ... colonization of culture's signifying patterns ..."[12] I would argue in support of McGowan's charge and in accord with Antonio Gramsci, that the hegemonic control of signification and representation is always backed by economic *and* coercive power.

The representational/portrayal crisis of modernist art is to be viewed as the artists and intellectuals being out of sync with the new realities posed by capitalist development

after 1945 and especially during the years after the watershed of circa 1970. Jameson calls the global, yet American, postmodern culture as the skin or husk that clings to and provides the outer part of the internal economic situation of U.S. military and economic domination, i.e., the notorious "New World Order." The demise of Soviet power and the bipolar world it helped cause is a related recent example of the most powerful capitalist State's (perhaps temporarily) successful drive toward neo-imperial, global hegemony. Jameson's portrayal of cultural realities as the skin of the internal economic situation (backed by military power) is based upon his conviction that the outer and inner are organically connected, viz., parts of a whole. This conceptualization avoids the earlier Marxist base-superstructure dichotomy that was too mechanical and linearly causal to adequately represent the subtlety of complex realities. As we shall see, Jameson is concerned about people's ability to "map" in order to understand and hopefully resist the global and seemingly decentered network within which we find ourselves enmeshed as individuals. Part three will provide an analysis of "mapping" in terms of educational considerations and necessities. It is feared by opponents of the "New World Order" that resistance to this global system of power is too easily disarmed and reabsorbed. Jameson is convinced that the pedagogical political culture that must be developed should empower people to grasp some sense of their place within the global system—one that unfortunately is not of their own making.[13] The postmodernist tendency to deconstruct the individual makes it difficult for such a person to come to grips with the global system of late capitalism. The liberals' discomfort with thinking holistically may also be an impediment to what Jameson urges us to do.

We turn to Marshall Berman's analysis of postmodernism. He argues that because capitalism is still dominant—as it was during the period dominated by modernist attempts at portrayal and representation—current intellectual and artistic work must continue to focus upon capitalism's dominant presence. He does not think that we are past the problems caused by Marx and Engels' phrase: "All that is solid melts into air." Modernism represents, in Berman's view, an attempt by human beings to make themselves at home

within a constantly changing historical period that featured capitalism's growing power to shape events. We are reminded that Marx believed the chaos in which people were forced to live—because of the non-democratic development of business and industry under capitalism—would ultimately force us to face the real conditions of our lives and relations with one another. Marx and other great nineteenth-century critics understood the developing determinants upon human freedom; however, they "believed that modern individuals had the capacity both to understand this fate and, once they understood it, to fight it. Hence, even in the midst of a wretched present, they could imagine an open future. Twentieth-century critics of modernity almost entirely lack this empathy with, and faith in, their fellow ... men and women."[14]

The postmodernist intellectuals seem to have forgotten that the bourgeoisie and capitalists have transformed social reality in the past; furthermore, as the capitalist imperium spreads and grows more powerful presently, they advise us that we can know very little and act mostly defensively and locally. Postmodernists argue also that power is everywhere instead of concentrated in transnational corporations and the class States. Marx's modernist representational genius helps us understand how the capitalism that is seen and experienced through its daily, banal, socioeconomic activities is, in a sense, a mask for a nefarious, Faustian, underworld system. These seemingly common-place activities we all participate in are driven by relentless market imperatives that even the capitalists cannot control—forces which do great harm to human beings. Modernist representations and interpretations were attempts to deal with what was then a turbulent present, as well as to hopefully assist people rearrange socioeconomic reality through collective political action in order to be more at home in a world transformed by democratic effort.

All too many postmodernist thinkers do not believe it is possible to employ intellectual activity to unmask oppression and injustice, in part because of their fear that all forms of inquiry merely refer people from one authority to another, therefore adding to the

perpetuation of authoritarianism. Relatedly, postmodernists are not convinced that thought can penetrate into what is called the nature of things. Furthermore, they are not hopeful that cognition can penetrate to bedrock in order to provide a foundation for a liberatory praxis. As Henry Kariel has written, "For postmodernists, appeals to a fixed order ... or transcultural values ring hollow ... modernists could still assume the existence of some wholesome reality beyond the process of modernization, some stable transhistorical ground on which to take one's stand ... Unblinking voyeurs within the culture of utilitarian calculations, their [postmodernists'] strategy is to distance themselves from it ..."[15] Referring especially to Michel Foucault, Berman claims that many key postmodernist thinkers judge criticism to be hollow because the critic him/herself is " 'in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves, since we are part of its mechanism.' "[16] This exercise in impotence reminds one of the cartoon strip called "Pogo" by Walt Kelly in which the character blurted out that "we have met the enemy and he [sic] is us." How convenient and reassuring this is to those who hold and exercise real power. Marx understood, and tried to explain, that behind the facade constructed within the cultural skin of capitalist production, accumulation and labor relations lurked the most violently destructive ruling class in history. He "unveils the modern bourgeoisie as consummate nihilists on a ... vaster scale than [most] modernist intellectuals can conceive ... These bourgeoisie have alienated themselves from their own creativity because they cannot bear to look into the moral, social and psychic abyss that their creativity opens up."[17]

In the climactic moment of the *Manifesto*, its authors present a picture of the class-stratified society giving way to the possibility that: The free development of each will be the condition for the free development of all. Released from the distortions of the market, self-development can flower and the nightmare of bourgeois society can become a source of joy and beauty for all. One can see the postmodernist intellectual unpacking his/her deconstruction tools at the mere mention of such words, concepts and hopes. Pity!

Berman reminds us (through Marx's ideal from *The German Ideology*) that only in community with others can each person cultivate his/her gifts complexly and prodigiously, and that personal freedom is possible only within free supportive association. It is only by keeping alive discourses and great problematics of the past (such as Marx's) that we can hope to understand the continuing problem of capitalist direct power and hegemony today. Berman accuses the postmodern mystique of a denial of its continuation with modernist portrayal in relation to problems needing resolutions; furthermore, he charges postmodernists with echoing "the ruling class self-delusion that it has conquered the troubles and perils of the past ..."[18] Daniel Singer connects the fashionable prefix "post" to the continuation of capitalist dominance: " 'If you dare to ask why it is that a world changing so fantastically in so many respects must somehow be tied forever to the same forms of property and exploitation, you are dismissed as a dinosaur. On reflection, the philosophy behind all this futuristic mumbo-jumbo is rather old-fashioned. Like all ruling classes, the present-day one admits the existence of history up to its own triumph ... Post-everything means capitalism forever ...' "[19]

The historical possibility that existed in the yet indeterminate early twentieth century to alter and overcome anti-democratic capitalism was superseded by a routinized, bureaucratic economy of universal commodity production in which mass consumption, and then mass culture, became virtually interchangeable. It is this condition of capitalist victory within spheres of production, consumption, signification, intellectual and artistic portrayal—as well as the colonization of everyday life for most of us—that postmodernist culture represents. To reinforce what was said earlier, postmodernism is the cultural skin of late capitalism—and especially of the dramatic leap made by capitalism since circa 1970. David Harvey has written that a sea-change in culture and political-economic practices has occurred during the last quarter century. In fact "strong a priori grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the

organization of capitalism. But these changes, when set against the basic rules of capitalist accumulation, appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society."[20] Because capitalism is still basically the same and still paramount in its power, modernist and postmodernist representation must not be seen as static reifications imposed on the fluid dynamics and contradictions of capitalism. The superstructure or cultural skin of the complex and in-motion capitalism is never comprised of one or another fixed configuration, but represents, instead, a constant oscillation between and among various features and developments within the core(s) of the economic system. Harvey is convinced that what has come to be called postmodernism represents, for the most part, the seemingly logical extension of the market's power over the whole range of cultural production. The merging and cooptation of popular culture(s) with cultural production geared to sales of commodities and experiences during this historical period has been caused importantly by newly developed technologies. In any case, there does not seem to be much effective development of self-reflection or critique of what occurs, "leading many to accuse postmodernism of a ... direct surrender to commodification, commercialization and the market ..."[21]

The absence of sustained cultural criticism of the status quo may signal the virtual total victory of capitalism during this period of its ascendency. Advocates of popular cultural forms such as "rap music" argue that there are effective oppositional voices out in the real world (beyond highbrowism). Be that as it may, the commercial culture is well-known for its desire and ability to coopt almost everything being created in order to maximize sales. Harvey wonders if the postmodernist response to titanic economic and technological movements is simply "the commercialization and domestication of modernism, and a reduction of the latter's already tarnished aspirations to a *laissez-faire*, 'anything goes' market eclecticism? Does it, therefore, undermine or integrate with neo-conservative politics? And do we attach its rise to some radical restructuring of capitalism

... [or] view it ... as the 'art of an inflationary era' or as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' ...?"[22]

Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism* (1975) helped us theorize the third stage of capitalism (the first being entrepreneurial, the second being monopoly and the third multinational) from a Marxist perspective. Jameson explains that Mandel's achievement made his own thoughts on postmodernism possible "and they are therefore to be understood as an attempt to theorize the specific logic of the cultural production of the third stage, and not as yet another disembodied cultural critique ... of the spirit of the age."[23] Both Jameson and Harvey consider every intellectual position concerning postmodernist representation of contemporary culture as implicitly or explicitly a political and evaluative statement on the nature of multinational capitalism today.

The nature of today's capitalism emerged from the need to move beyond the problems posed by Fordism and Keynesianism. Labor strength, entitlements, relatively liberal governments, the cost of the Vietnam War and the increasing intercapitalist rivalries led to profit squeezes. Capitalists responded in a variety of ways, and among these strategies were technological innovation, automation, searches for new product lines, attempts to find new markets, flight to cheap labor areas, mergers *and* quicker turnover time in general. Out of this response to problems of profitability emerged a new regime of accumulation that was coupled with repression of popular progressive forces, as well as unconstitutional support for rightist regimes and counterrevolutionary forces around the world. In Harvey's view, *the turn to a more flexible accumulative strategy was coupled with a cultural turn to postmodernism.*

This emerging flexible accumulation features a greatly intensified rate of technological and organizational innovation. Perhaps indicative of the new regime of flexible accumulation has been the emergence of a time-space compression that radically alters how people see the world and how they can react to it. This new regime features accelerated turnover time in production that results in parallel speedups in exchange and

consumption. Computerization plays a key role in this compression of time-space. One of the results of this quickened turnover time has been a shift in emphasis from the production of durable goods to the production of events and spectacles—which feature almost instantaneous turnover time. As a result of the ability to *create* consumer "needs" that are trendy and ephemeral, the agents of consumer capitalism interact with, and profit from, postmodernist style changes and deconstructive obsolescence. The accentuation of the volatility and ephemerality of fashions, dizzying arrays of new products, etc., are all examples of "All that is solid melts into air." The current stress upon instantaneity (e.g., fast food) and disposability (e.g., paper/plastic products and even clothes) in conjunction with and supported by highly sophisticated advertisement reveals the brute fact of a disgustingly wasteful throw-away society. This throw-away society—driven by the greed and logic of late capitalism—may have empirically verifiable links with the changes in family and other values that conservatives, reactionaries and primitive "know-nothings" complain about. However, these complainants seem not to have a clue about capitalism's role in the process. The need for the agents of capitalism during this period of flexible accumulation to manipulate taste and opinion does not bode well for appropriate citizen-consumer awareness. Stuart Ewen has argued that, unless we are able to recognize/confront the infiltration of the commodity system into every area of our lived experiences, social change will continue to be directed by corporate propaganda. He believes that the triumph of capitalism in this century has been dependent, in part, upon its ability to define, contend with and direct the conditions of everyday social life. Specifically, Ewen contends that "social change cannot come about in a context where objects are invested with human subjective capacities. It cannot come about where commodities contain the limits of social betterment [e.g., use Murine eyedrops instead of insisting on clean air]. It requires that people never concede the issue of who shall define and control the social realm."[24] Unfortunately, the construction of new signs, systems and imagery that characterizes the postmodern landscape does not promise an easy exit

from the sophisticated department store of late capitalism—what is more, all too often postmodernist decorators have erected the displays that make a simple existence nearly impossible.

Late capitalism's directors and operatives may be said to be more concerned with the production of signs and images than the commodity itself. The product advertised is often slipped suggestively into a life scene portrayed on television that appeals to the viewer. Television is the most powerful vehicle of presentation for the new regime of flexible accumulation and the consumption of ephemeral products. Too few critics of television realize that what this medium really does is to feature an uninterrupted flow of pictures, which are decontextualized; therefore, the viewer is treated to presentations in which nearly everything is seen as equal/commensurate/interchangeable; furthermore, the emphasis is on surface and a collapsed sense of time and space. Capitalism and its television tool promote an addictive audience. The viewers' (many of them are our students) attention is directed to extrinsic needs and wants, to the promotion of insatiable desires and to a resultant politics of distraction that sustains demand, keeps profits up and contributes to the failure of many citizens in their attempts to figure out what is happening. When past and present become compressed, time does seem to fly by. According to Harvey, "This ... is the kind of environment in which deconstructionism can flourish. If it is impossible to say anything of solidity and permanence in the midst of this ephemeral and fragmented world, then why not join in the [language] game? Everything, from novel writing and philosophizing to the experience of labouring or making a home, has to face the challenge of accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values. The temporary contract in everything, as Lyotard remarks ... then becomes the hallmark of postmodern living."[25] We are experiencing another fierce round in the long history of the shrinking of space through the conquest to time that has been central to capitalism's dynamics. Harvey articulates well this ability to alter such basic phenomenon as time and space: "It is ... not hard to see how all of this might create a more

general crisis of representation [or portrayal]. The central value system to which capitalism had always appealed to validate and gauge its actions, is dematerialized and shifting, time horizons are collapsing, and it is hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it comes to assessing causes and effects, meanings and values."[26]

MAPPING AND THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

The educational problem of how reality is to be viewed, evaluated and represented/portrayed has been of concern to various groups of many political persuasions for quite some time. Many conservatives who belonged to the Reagan-Bush coalition in the U.S., as well as their counterparts in the U.K., have expressed concern with—and sought political solutions to—the alleged liberal (or radical) takeover of the media, schools, art exhibits, museums and government-sponsored art. It could be argued that these conservatives and reactionaries—who are in alliance with capital but are often energized by social issues (especially in this country) such as school prayer, right to life, anti-gay and anti-feminist movement, etc.—are amazingly unaware that the representations made by postmodernist intellectuals and artists (many of which shock Rightists) are mimetic of the brute realities caused mainly by the regime of flexible accumulation. Postmodernism is rooted in the dynamics and realities of daily life itself—which is importantly caused and structured by capitalism.

The contemporary problems and possibilities of representational/portrayal must be central to schooling and education. Jameson's concept of ideology speaks to the possibility for effective imaginary representations of the student's relationships to his/her real life conditions. Such ideological representation allows an understanding of the gap between local positioning and such phenomenon as the totality of class structures, as well as other voids between phenomenological perception in general and the larger reality that transcends all limited perception and understanding. Ideology attempts to span, coordinate or map by means of conscious and unconscious representation so that opaque conditions can stand

revealed. However, as we all know, this is difficult to achieve in the absence of memberships in collective movements that stress the theoretical grasp of issues and the possibilities for liberatory praxes.

Jameson speaks to my own experience as a teacher when he points out how difficult it is to represent or picture certain persons, groups and/or unindicted co-conspirators. The world of high-powered decision-making which occurs far from the sites that students occupy is simply beyond their grasp—and of citizens in general. Because too few people have the opportunity and/or will to study systematically, and because the popular cultural representations are not very effective at allowing viewers/listeners to understand the total system under which they live, all to many persons fail to achieve the necessary awareness for successful political action—although some of our less schooled forebears did manage to achieve such awareness and political success. McGowan speaks of Jameson's insight into the educational problem of representation: "Postmodern culture, with its endless projection of disconnected, decontextualized images, breaks down the systematic underpinnings of meaning ... For Jameson ... the problem of late capitalism's 'total system' is that it is so large and complex that the subject [learner] can no longer 'think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system' ... [but] to think fragments instead only indicates the desperate straights we are in."[27] Segmented programmed instruction—and even the misuse of computerized schooling—do not help our students to understand the need to see things holistically. Here is the real educational-political challenge of our historical period, viz., the need to convince students and other citizens of the need to formulate a "big-picture" understanding of a very large series of pictures—but a series that is (hopefully) not just random. Without a collective generational attempt to grasp theoretically—in a secular empirical way—the colossus that is capitalism, the possibilities for genuine participatory democracy within a community of shared meanings and concerns (although respectful of differences) are not good. In Jameson's words, "leaving the gender of the verb out of it, we all do want to 'master' history in

whatever ways turn out to be possible: the escape from the nightmare of history—the conquest by human beings of ... otherwise seemingly blind and natural 'laws' of socioeconomic fatality [should be our goal] ..."[28] In Dewey's view—in agreement with his Marxist cousins—human striving to make stability prevail over the chaos of brute occurrence is the main task of human intelligence.

Jameson's commitment to mapping and seeing the big-picture of postmodernism as the cultural skin of late capitalism provides us with a useful transition to a consideration of some educational ramifications of the postmodernist problematic. It is risky to speculate how postmodernist ideas will play out in a place called school—or how educators and students will face the challenge of this phenomenon. As we know, the useful postmodernist insights into the difficulties involved with establishing and defending canons and other forms of foundationalism, essentialism and "basics" are not new. Dewey and the pragmatist-progressives have already provided a wrecking-ball prelude to current forms of anti-foundationalism. In my view, the real and possible contributions of postmodernist thinkers to a liberatory educational project have more to do with the make up of the persons and groups they seek to champion than to the novelty of their insights. If older liberatory projects privileged different and more restricted groups, e.g., social class, it is not as though the potential for broader inclusion had to wait for postmodernism. However, it is a fact that postmodernists have championed newly recognized others who were formerly excluded and/or misrepresented. The serious discussions underway in educational theory concerning class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexual preference represent a significant forwarding of the democratic project. The greater inclusion of formerly marginalized persons, e.g., women, in scholarly discourses has brought a refreshing poignancy to our conceptions of fairness in education. However, it is not clear whether the current inability to provide an umbrella over the necessary accentuations of difference and otherness will prove helpful to a liberatory project that must be based upon broad coalitions of persons who can find common ground. The recognition by many postmodernist intellectuals of the

stunning complexities of our lives is helpful; however, this (arguably) unprecedented complexity should not be considered an insurmountable barrier to a transformative education and politics.

Educators would be well served to take into consideration the pressure brought upon theory and practice by feminists and race-relations contributions as well as by post-structuralist writers in fields such as linguistics, literary theory and psychoanalysis. These sources "drew attention to the inadequacy of class reductionist accounts of human society, the marginalization of women and minorities in radical research, and to the undeveloped status of ... conceptualizations of human agency ... and systems of meanings."[29] As Cameron McCarthy and Michael Apple explain, American radical educators adopted a more culturalist approach to education during the late 1970s in an attempt to deal with exploding realities (caused importantly by the agency of formerly marginalized people) that orthodox forms of Marxist analysis were not able to handle very well. Attempts have been made by some educational theorists to move beyond a concentration on social class in favor of an emphasis upon the *interrelations* among class, race, and gender realities in schools and society. These attempts are aimed at resolving tensions between structuralism and culturalism in radical educational research. The self- and group-production of identity formation within schools and elsewhere is obviously not the result of social class factors alone; it is of crucial importance to broaden the categories of membership and/or oppression in order to understand complex causalities involved in poor school achievement, as well as economic marginality and political impotence in adult life.

Without forgetting the importance of material context and structural limitation within which schooling and education occur, it is important to understand what Edward Said has pointed out: that partly as a result of imperialism, " 'all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated'; that crossing borders, dispossession and exile are the [post] modern norms; that all readers ought to be nomads and all reading 'contrapuntal'; that we are in our 'history-making' less

the 'symphonic whole' ... than 'an atonal ensemble' of complementary and interdependent ... rhetorics ... and that even the canon itself cannot be read without reading its opposition."[30] Said's insight is representative of a postmodern, anti-canon position at its best. In the U.S. we have experienced recently an orchestrated call for a return to basics in education, along with the restoration of the essential curriculum, replacement of heuristics by authoritarian didactics; enlistment of our youth into the service of capitalism and the State through renewed emphasis on vocationalism; restriction of schooling for leadership and power to the sons and daughters of the affluent, and the attempted abandonment of public school as a place where the harshness of the market can be alleviated through the empowerment of potentially critical citizens who could, hopefully, make the promise of democracy more real. The development of a society and school where difference is seen as a valuable resource is dependent currently upon the acceptance of living without certainty relying, instead, upon warranted assertibility.

The serious points raised by postmodernist thinkers are relevant for educational problems and possibilities. Relatedly, the recent appearance of critical feminist theory has points in common with some forms of postmodernist discourse. Henry Giroux has argued that both feminism and postmodernism "view reason as plural and partial, define subjectivity as multilayered and contradictory, and posit contingency and difference against various forms of essentialism."[31] The feminist credo "no more experts" is based on the belief that, given the right conditions, every woman has something to say with regard to how her life is to be conducted. It is not difficult to extend such a potentially liberatory insight to the whole population—including students. Patti Lather has written: "At one level, the problematic of postmodernism is to 'make of our disorders new knowledge' ... What this might mean within the context of educational thought and practice is ... that the politics of undecidability, the unavoidable open-endedness and inherent perspectivity of knowledge ... [can] 'become an access route to a whole rethinking of the educational enterprise.' "[32] The insertion of well-defined notions of difference and subjectivity into

the older pragmatic-progressive educational discourse is largely attributable to current postmodernist thought. As Barry Kanpol has written: "Underlying this notion of difference is a political project that seeks to shift the locus of power from the privileged and powerful to struggling groups of people."[33] He explains that in the K-12 public schools this means attempting to overcome oppressive teaching conditions, dehumanizing evaluation criteria, biased accountability schemes, teacher-proof standardized curricula, authoritarian administration, etc.

Giroux's term "border pedagogy" suggests that educators move out of the center of the dominant culture to its margins in order to analyze critically what has been taken for granted. With regard to students, Giroux writes they "engage knowledge as a border-crosser, as person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power. These are not only physical borders, they are cultural ... [and also] maps of rules and regulations that serve to either limit or enable particular identities ... Students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten ... [Relatedly] educators can redefine the teacher student relationship in ways that allow students to draw upon their own personal experiences as real knowledge."[34] John Dewey would not disagree! The call for finding out where we as teachers are located on the map—or within social-class realities—cannot be attributed to postmodernist insistence alone as we have seen. For Giroux, central to border pedagogy as it is informed by postmodernist critique is the attempt to recognize, expose, understand and challenge those master narratives that privilege patriarchical, white and class-specific versions of the world. In the end, border pedagogy and border crossing are based upon the recognition of and need to operate as a nomad or migrant within a terrain of danger, openness and possibility. However, the exhortation by Giroux to develop a "view from elsewhere" may not be based on eccentricity or even the happy exercise of freedom, but upon the deterritorialized condition of so many persons who are not always pleased to be "elsewhere" or continuously on the move. In this sense, the

nomad had lost the battle on the home terrain to the forces of late capitalism, its allies in the class State et al. The postmodernist posture is one of defeatism.

In spite of temporary defeat, all of us must live and do the best we can. The insightful challenges of postmodernist thought to the project of liberatory, equitable, meaningful, useful and democratic education cannot, and must not, be ignored. The postmodernist insistence that the complex heterogeneity of our students and citizens be respected is admirable. The relationship of genuine multiculturalism to bona fide democracy is obvious. Furthermore, postmodernists have reminded us that nearly everything we do as persons, educators and citizens is implicated in power relations—asymmetrical relations based on class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference.

Sounding a critical interpretation of postmodernist thought, Svi Shapiro claims that "at the root of the postmodernist condition is a terrible failure of hope and possibility ... There is a deep underlying cynicism towards the possibilities of transforming society so as to bring about human liberation."[35] If there are no referents beyond ever-changing signs, were there nothing beyond signifier and signified (only the text), then postmodernist talk amounts to little more than conversation. Situating themselves at the cutting edge of meaning and beyond may excite some avant-garde types; however, it is difficult to argue that such a posture could enable a staunch defense (let alone improvement) of the K-12 public school during this time of Rightist attacks on it. The circularity endemic to language that is perceived of as lacking connections with things outside of conversations and texts is of little help to those who are involved in the give-and-take of concrete school experience where choices must be made. Landon Beyer and Daniel Liston think that "in positing ... a self-referential and particularistic ... discourse ... postmodernism may limit the kind of productive moral and political actions that can make a difference in the public space ... [and] may erode ... the notions of pedagogy and praxis that are so ... important in educational theory ..."[36]

CONCLUSION

It should not be surprising to my audience/readers that my evaluation of postmodernist thought (as I understand it) does not warrant high marks when viewed as social theory. Its contributions to intramural education practice—and to a lesser extent, educational theory—deserves fairly good grades. However, because of my continued belief that capitalism is the greatest impediment and threat to bona fide democracy, it is impossible for me to endorse postmodernist thought and representation as an overall ally of the project I favor. Although postmodernists have contributed to making the K-12 public school more liveable, we who have studied educational history know that agents of capitalism and the class State have tolerated (and even promoted) certain kinds of freedoms, even democratic ones, as long as they did not threaten capitalism-as-a-system. Students of the Dewey School realize that there is a precedent for a school that was an island of democratic freedom for its time; however, it proved to be limited in the end because educational reform is no substitute for structural change within the economy, sociopolitical system and everyday lives of people. Postmodernist attacks on some of the most effective and bravest opponents of capitalism cause me to see many postmodernist thinkers as being part of the problem, rather than a solution.

There must occur a strengthening of the democratic Left's insights into the capabilities of men and women (as well as some youngsters) to act collectively as agents of a transformative politics that can alter any status quo that is judged to be unjust. The central role of theory in informing attempts at liberatory praxis must be understood and valued by democrats. The need to develop theories that explain the total global realities of late capitalism—and its cultural skin—is especially important. The democratic Left must not fall prey to postmodernist assumptions which identify big-picture theory with totalitarianism. The distrust of theory leaves people confined within a status quo that represents a defeat for bona fide democracy. It must be realized that, although deconstruction is a valuable tool for combating tyranny, the possibilities must be kept open

for reconstruction through participation in broad coalition politics that seek to find common denominators and a common good. The school is part of the larger society; therefore, analyses that are helpful to intramural concerns are less valuable than those that address both school and society in a unified way.

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[1]Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1929), 4.

[2]Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), vii-viii.

[3]John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 15.

[4]Ibid., 13–4.

[5]Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 132.

[6]David Ingram, *Critical Theory and Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 203.

[7]Sarup, *Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*, 140.

[8]See, Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundaries* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), passim for a moving account of the problems involved with our K-12 public schools being part of reproductive process that condemns millions of young people to marginality and failure. Rose also describes what committed, gifted and energetic teachers can do to help these students enter into the kinds of conversations that allow the possibility for escape from this marginality.

[9]Todd Gitlin, "Hip-Deep in Post-modernism," *The New York Times Book Review* (November 6, 1988), 1.

[10]Ibid., 36.

[11]Ibid.

[12]McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, 17.

[13]See, Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347–57.

[14]Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 27.

[15]Henry S. Kariel, *The Desperate Politics of Postmodernism* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 44.

[16]Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 34.

[17]Ibid., 100–1. For a series of studies dealing with the possible relationships between the rise and practice of fascism (and specifically the Nazi version) and its host bourgeois-capitalist system and culture (which cannot bear to look honestly into the abyss), see, Michael N. Dubowski and Isidor Walliman, eds. *Radical Perspectives On The Rise of Fascism In Germany, 1919–1945* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), passim, and Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and The Attempt To Escape From The Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), passim.

[18]Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 346.

[19]Harvey J. Kaye, *Powers of the Past: Reflections on the Crisis and the Promise of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 148.

[20]David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1980), vii.

[21]Ibid., 59.

[22]Ibid., 42.

[23]Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 400.

[24]Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), 220.

[25]Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernism*, 291.

[26]Ibid., 298–9.

[27]McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, 156–7.

[28]Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 342–3.

[29]Cameron McCarthy and Michael W. Apple, "Race, Class and Gender in American Educational Research: Toward a Nonsynchronous Parallelist Position," in *Class, Race, and Gender in American Education*, ed. Lois Weiss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 18.

[30]John Leonard, "Novel Colonies," review of Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* and Ahmadou Kourama, *Monnew*, *The Nation* 256, no. 11 (March 22, 1993): 388.

[31]Henry A. Giroux, "Introduction: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism: Rethinking the Boundaries of Educational Discourse," in *Postmodernism, Feminism, And Cultural Politics*, ed. Henry A. Giroux (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 34.

[32]Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 41.

[33]Barry Kanpol, "Postmodernism in Education Revisited: Similarities Within Differences and the Democratic Imaginary," *Education Theory* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 219.

[34]Giroux, "Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity," in *Postmodernism, Feminism, And Cultural Politics*, 248–9.

[35]Svi Shapiro, "Postmodernism and the Crisis of Reason: Social Change or the Drama of the Aesthetic?," *Educational Foundations* 5, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 61.

[36]Landon E. Beyer and Daniel P. Liston, "Discourse or Moral Action? A Critique of Postmodernism," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 371.